News | India-Pakistan Partition

The forgotten massacre that ignited the Kashmir dispute

In November 1947, thousands of Muslims were killed in Jammu by paramilitaries led by the army of Dogra ruler Hari Singh.

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“My father was young then and other immediate family members were in Kashmir at that time. But many of my relatives were brutally killed,” the 63-year-old told Al Jazeera.

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“To be honest that was a mad period. There was no humanity shown at that time,” Khan, who retired as senior police officer, said at his home in Jammu.

In November 1947, thousands of Muslims were massacred in Jammu region by mobs and paramilitaries led by the army of Dogra ruler Hari Singh.

The exact number of casualties in the killings that continued for two months is not known but estimates range from 20,000 to 237,000 and nearly half million forced into displacement across the border into the newly created nation of Pakistan and its administered part of Kashmir.

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Khan said many of his relatives had escaped to Pakistan, where they continue to live. “The incident divided families. There were a lot of Muslims in Jammu but now you won’t find many,” he said.

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a programme of expulsion and murder carried out over three weeks between October-November 1947," Idrees Kanth, a fellow at International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, who researched the 1940s history of Kashmir, told Al Jazeera.

In mid-October, the Dogra Army troops began expelling Muslim villagers from Jammu province. The refugees were sent on foot toward West Punjab (later to form part of Pakistan), where most were accommodated in refugee camps in the districts of Sialkot, Jhelum, Gujrat and Rawalpindi.

On November 5, Kanth said, the Dogra Army soldiers began another organised evacuation of the Muslims but "instead of taking them to Sialkot, as they had been promised, the trucks drove them to forest hills of Rajouri districts of Jammu, where they were executed".

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Kanth added that there may have been a systematic attempt by the dying Dogra regime to ensure that records of the incident are destroyed and made it a lesser known massacre of the partition.

“I guess as happens with certain events, they got lost to history and resurface at a later time and in that sense they sort of rewrite our memory of the past. I would say the particular incident was sort of lost on us to a great extent until the post 1990s when the event was resurrected as yet another example of Dogra regime’s communal politics,” Kanth said.

‘Demographic changes’

The historians say that the killings carried out by the Hindu ruler’s army and Sikh army was a “state sponsored genocide” to bring out demographic changes in Jammu – a region which had an overwhelming population of Muslims.

“The massacre of more than two lakh (two hundred thousands) Muslims was state-sponsored and state supported. The forces from Patiala Punjab were called in, RSS (a right-wing Hindu organisation) was brought to communalise the whole scenario and kill Muslims,” said PG Rasool, the author of a book The Historical Reality of Kashmir Dispute.

The Muslims, who constituted more than 60 percent of the population of Jammu region, were reduced to a minority after the killings and displacement.

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“They didn’t want that people in Kashmir – which had a Muslim majority from the beginning – should know about it because it could have led to demonstrations. The state from the beginning has tried to cover up it. I don’t call it massacre but it was a staged genocide that is unfortunately not talked about,” he said.

“They thought even if they lose Kashmir at least they should get Jammu and the only way was to have a Hindu majority.”

Muhammad Ashraf Wani, a professor of History at the University of Kashmir, said that the Muslims in Jammu “do not talk about it because they fear for their survival”.

“This is the worst tragedies in the history of Kashmir but unfortunately no one talks about it because the state doesn’t want anyone to remember it,” Wani said.

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As the army of tribesmen rushed to Kashmir, the army of Dogra monarch fled to Jammu. The king Hari Singh signed the instrument of accession with New Delhi, which sent its army to fight the tribesmen.

The fighting of several weeks between tribesmen and Indian Army eventually led to first India-Pakistan war. When New Delhi and Islamabad agreed to a ceasefire in January 1948, the formerly princedom of Jammu and Kashmir was divided between the two countries.

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